

BowWOW!

Facts, observations and musings about Our Best Friends

Could it be more disgusting?

There's one in every family. You know, Aunt Gert, who likes her sardines with peanut butter, your nephew who mines his nose up to the first knuckle, your creepy cousin Howard who ate paste in grade school. We all have a story of someone we love who does something Just Disgusting.

I have one, too. It's The Bea. She eats...poo. She always has and I suppose, if hasn't killed her yet, she always will. The act of eating feces is called coprophagia. It appears to be "one of those things" as far as dogs go: a behavior that certainly defies logic, good manners, and scientific study *and* mystifies dog trainers and veterinarians worldwide.

The simple truth is that nobody really knows why some dogs will make a beeline for the nearest pile. It's natural for dogs to want to sniff feces since the depositor's anal glands leave a sort of Post-It note for other dogs to "read". It's just as natural for some dogs to want to consume these little signposts.

There are several popular theories about the causes of this strange habit:

- A dog eats poo might doing so in order to supplement his own nutritionally deficient diet. He's not getting enough vitamins from the food he's given, so he chooses to eat the deposits of other animals in the hope he can sponge up some additional nutrition the second time around. Sounds good, but studies conducted on dogs suffering malnutrition and well-nourished dogs show that the incidence of coprophagia is virtually identical in both groups.
- It might be a behavior left over from the carnivorous/scavenging heritage of dogs. When carnivores make a kill, they will consume the entire carcass of the animal—flesh, sinews, "offal", which includes the stomach, digestive tract and yep, its contents. It might be an instinctive behavior.
- It may be boredom or stress. This theory is sketchy but it comes down to dogs that lead under-stimulated, under-exercised lives will succumb to strange and compulsive habits. Simply, a dog will eat poo because there's nothing else to do.
- Internal parasites might be leaching nutrients and calories causing a severely infested dog to turn to technically edible substances that he would not normally eat to fill the gap.

- Nursing females will eat the feces of their pups as a means of keeping the den clean, and of hiding the existence of her pups from potential predators.

Clearly, theories abound on the subject. Unfortunately, most of them lack merit: the simple truth is that nobody knows with any degree of certainty as to why they do it. In Bea's case, having ruled out all the possible logical, medical reasons, I can only assume that she just plain likes poo. Currently, deer is her favorite flavor.

Here is a short list of tips for coping with the behavior and minimizing it as much as possible:

- Clean up your own backyard as soon as your dog potties. If it's not there, he can't eat it.
- Teach your dog to "leave it!" for times when you want to walk him off lead. (I've found, too, that now that Bea is deaf, a "leave it!" hand signal would have been a good idea.) This works extremely well when I can catch her eye.
- There are substances you can purchase from pet stores and vet clinics that when included in a pet's diet will make the feces unappealing. One product is called For-Bid. It worked extremely well curbing Bea from consuming her own, however, I can't seem to convince the neighborhood deer to partake.
- Adding natural deterrents such as canned pumpkin, pineapple or meat tenderizer anecdotally suggest they might make feces unpalatable.

I have great compassion for those who share this problem. We love our dogs for who they are, and what they are but not necessarily for what they do. As dog owners we can be diligent and kind, have a sense of humor and remember not to "kiss" after a walk in the woods.

BowWOW! Is a production of Tracie Korol and wholeDog. She is a holistic behavior coach, a canine massage therapist (CMT), herbalist, and canine homeopath. Want more information? Have a question? Send a note to Tracie at letstalk@wholedog.biz or visit www.wholedog.biz.

